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Manchester's Twentieth-Century Library: The John Rylands Library

In [Haunt](#)

The twenty first instalment as part of an ongoing series for Haunt Manchester by Dr [Peter N. Lindfield](#) FSA, exploring Greater Manchester's Gothic architecture and hidden heritage. Peter's previous Haunt Manchester articles include features on [Ordsall Hall](#), [Albert's Schloss and Albert Hall](#), the Mancunian Gothic Sunday School of [St Matthew's](#), [Arlington House](#) in Salford, Minshull Street City Police and Session Courts and [their furniture](#), [Moving Manchester's Shambles](#), [Manchester's Modern Gothic in St Peter's Square](#), what was [St John's Church](#), [Manchester Cathedral](#), [The Great Hall at The University of Manchester](#), [St Chad's](#) in Rochdale and more. From the city's striking Gothic features to the more unusual aspects of buildings usually taken for granted and history hidden in plain sight, a variety of locations will be explored and visited over the course of 2020.

In this article he considers [The John Rylands Library](#) on Deansgate. The Library is currently closed (at the time of writing, 18 June 2020) due to Covid-19 pandemic measures, and [its website](#) should be visited for future opening information. Haunt Manchester has also [previously featured](#) The John Rylands Library, including an interview with Writer In Residence Rosie Garland — read it [here](#).

Below - Exterior View of The John Rylands Library from Deansgate, Manchester. © Peter N. Lindfield.



Dr Peter N. Lindfield FSA is a Senior Research Associate in the Departments of English and History at Manchester Metropolitan University. He has published widely on Georgian Gothic architecture and design broadly conceived, as well as heraldry and the relevance of heraldic arts to post-medieval English intellectual, cultural, and aesthetic culture. Last year, as part of Gothic Manchester Festival 2019, he co-organised an event at [Chetham's Library](#) Baronial Hall with Professor Dale Townshend titled 'Faking Gothic Furniture' (it also features, along with The John Rylands Library, in a previous article by Peter, [here](#)). This involved discussing the mysterious George Shaw (1810-76), a local Upper Mill lad who developed an early interest in medieval architecture and heraldry, going on to create forgeries of Tudor and Elizabethan furniture for a number of high-profile individuals and places at the time, including Chetham's!

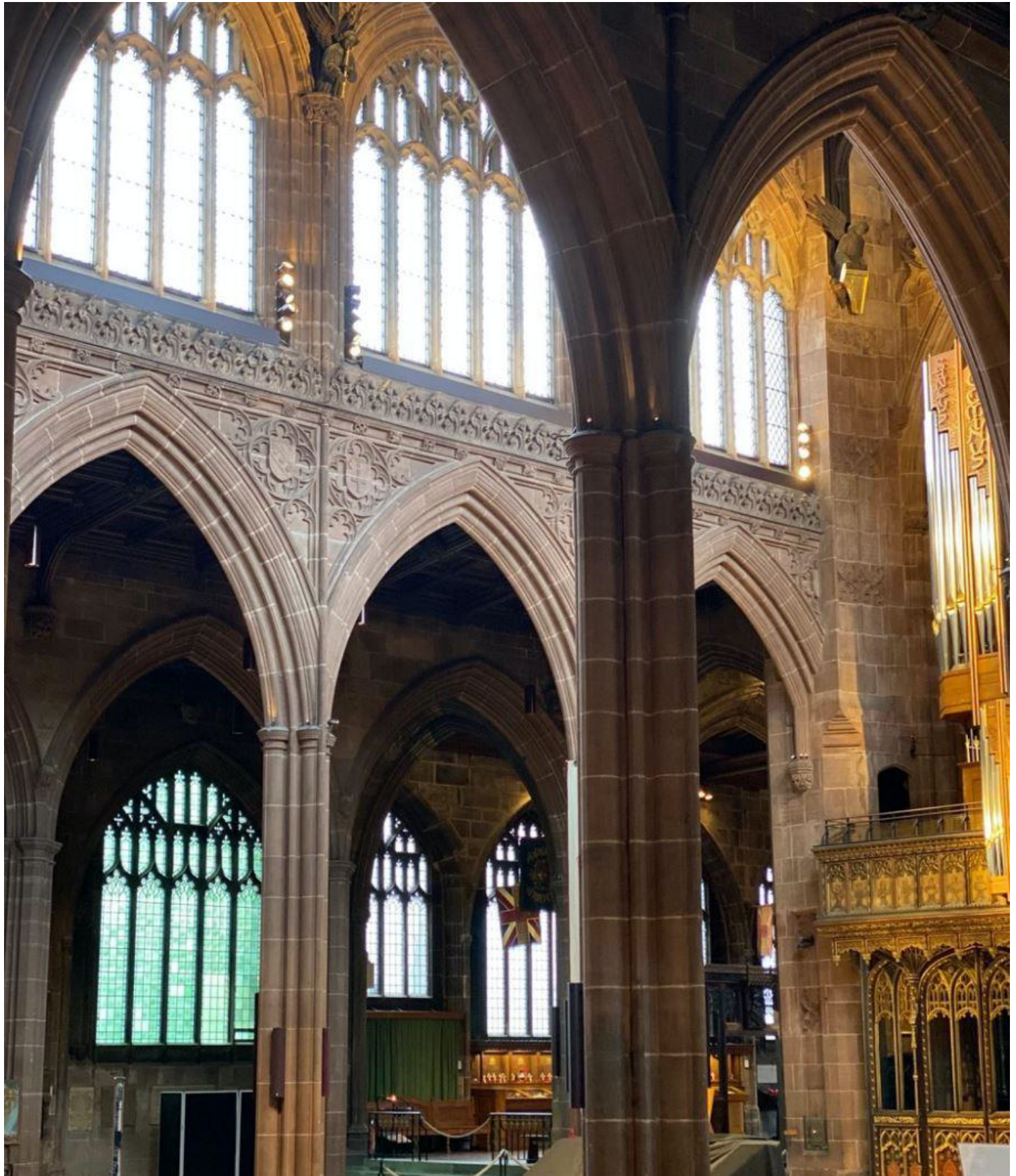
Currently Peter is completing his Leverhulme-funded research project exploring forged antiquarian materials in Georgian Britain, and also working on the recently re-discovered Henry VII and Elizabeth of York marriage bed, which itself was the inspiration behind many of Shaw's so-called 'Gothic forgeries'.

Manchester's Twentieth-Century Library: The John Rylands Library

As I have explored repeatedly in my previous twenty posts for Haunt Manchester at Visit Manchester, Gothic design dates from the medieval period, as exemplified by [Manchester Cathedral](#) (Fig.1) and [Chetham's Library](#). But, as I have also shown, Gothic architecture continued to be practised well into the early-modern and modern period, with buildings like the now destroyed [St](#)

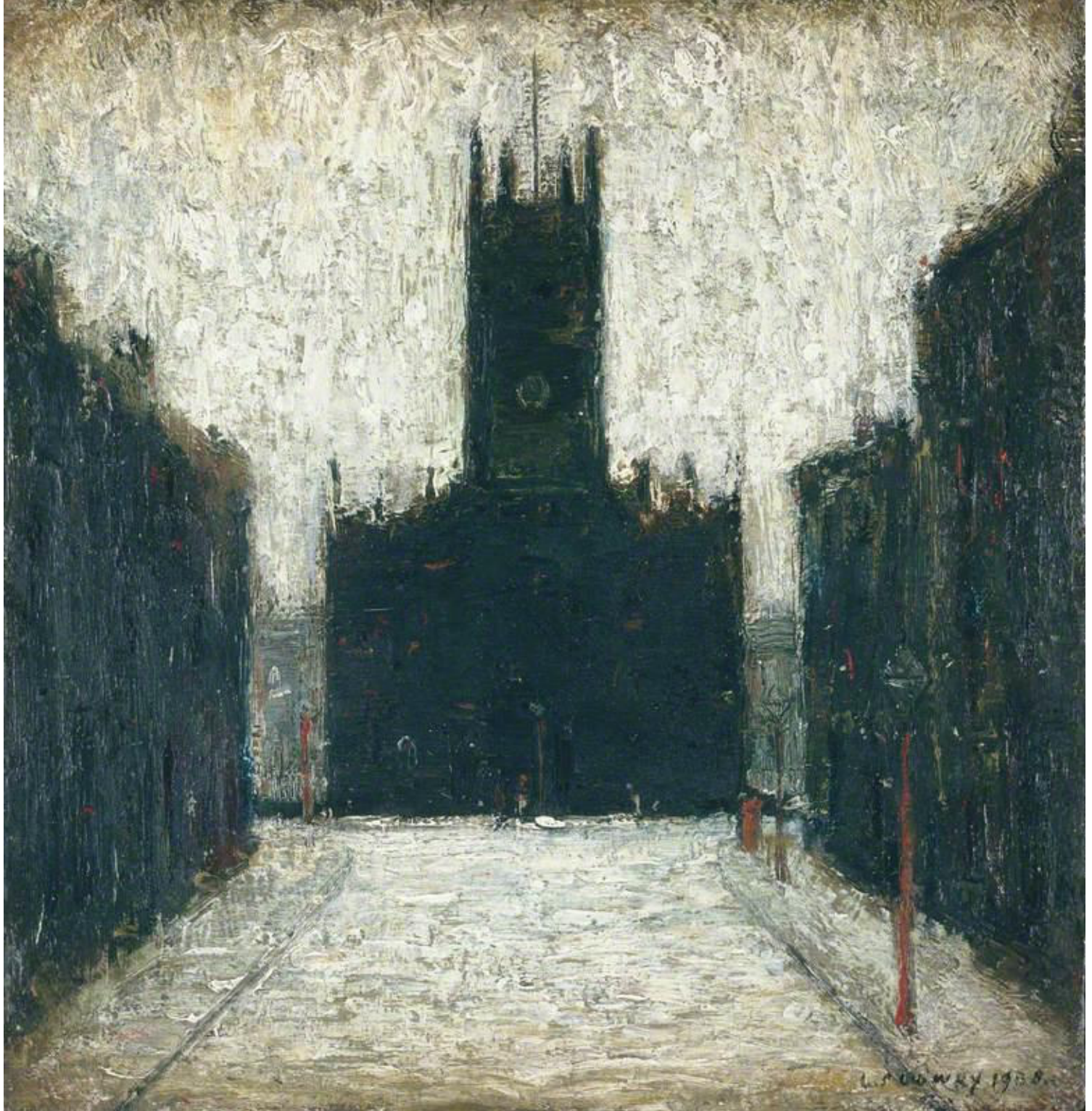
[John's Church](#), a building that L.S. Lowry painted (**Fig.2**), and which was photographed before its demolition in 1931, and then turned into print (**Fig.3**). The style continued to be practiced into the Victorian period, with Manchester awash with too many examples to name, and it also, as I have shown, continued into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with buildings including [Albert Hall](#) and the controversial [2, St Peter's Square](#).

Below - Fig.1: Interior of the nave of Manchester Cathedral. © Peter N. Lindfield.

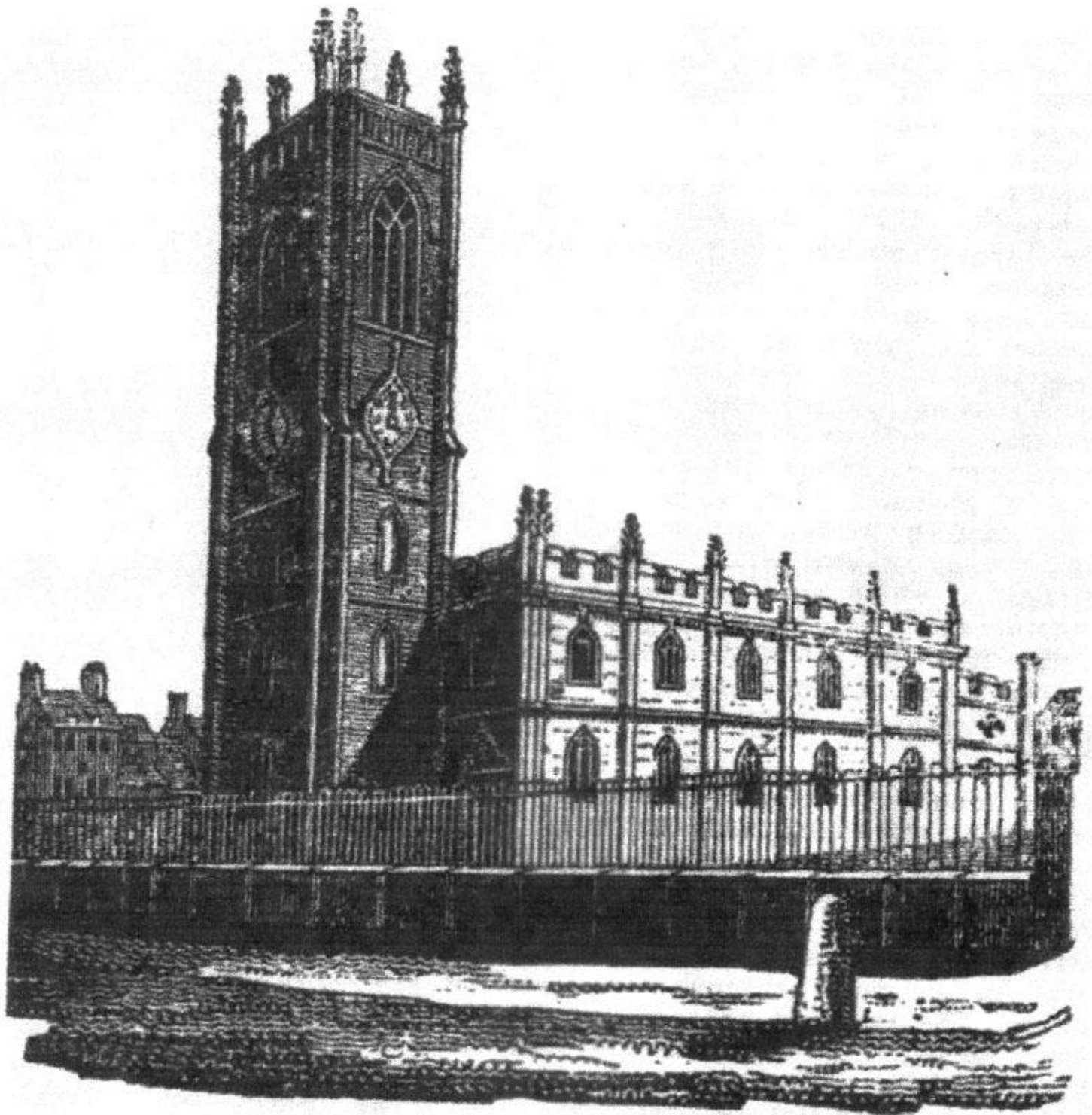




Below - Fig.2. L.S. Lowry, St John's Church, Manchester. 1938 [1928?]. 1987.78, Manchester Art Gallery.



Below - Fig.3: View of St John's Church, Manchester. Image in Public Domain.



St John's Church, 1816 (from Aston's "Picture of Manchester")

One of the most visible surviving Gothic buildings erected in Manchester is The John Rylands Library (**Fig.4**)—the most prominent has to be Manchester Town Hall which will be the subject of a future post. The John Rylands Library is now part of The University of Manchester Library and it houses the University's Rare Books and Manuscripts collection, and the building, including retail and special exhibition spaces, as well as a café, is also freely open to the public (it was before the current COVID-19 lockdown). Courtesy of the library's collection of over 250,000 rare printed works and more than 1,000,000 manuscripts and archival items, The John Rylands is one of the largest rare books and manuscripts libraries in the UK, and it forms an integral part of Manchester University's library; the third largest academic library in the UK.

Below - Fig.4: Exterior View of The John Rylands Library from Deansgate, Manchester. © Peter N. Lindfield.



The John Rylands Library was, however, built originally as an independent, endowed Public Library for the citizens of Manchester. It was named in honour of John Rylands (1801–88), Manchester's first multi-millionaire who made his money through the textile industry. He moved to Manchester having taken over his father's firm, Rylands & Sons. As a memorial to her deceased husband, Enriqueta Augustina Rylands (1843–1908), desired to enrich Manchester with a library designed, crucially, to be an architectural enhancement to the city. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, given the widespread and overwhelmingly Classical character of Victorian Manchester—think of the redevelopment of buildings along Deansgate, in St Ann's Square and on Exchange Street, the style chosen was Gothic. This intentional act of reviving historic British architecture chimes with all of the post-medieval Gothic buildings that I have written about thus far in my 2020 Visit Manchester posts.

What Enriqueta Augustina Rylands had built as a memorial to her dead husband spoke of ancient, medieval Britain, and the style of Manchester's ancient buildings that have largely disappeared. Basil Champneys (1842–1935) was chosen as the architect for this new building; he cherished the importance of artistry, rather than science, in the design of architecture, and so his buildings are seen in an artisanal light. Generally preferring to work in the Classical Queen Anne style, a lot of Champneys's work can be found in the University of Oxford, including the Library of Somerville College (1903), as well as the Rhodes building added to Oriel College between 1908 and 1911; in light of The Black Lives Matter movement, this is now a highly controversial structure.

The John Rylands building is certainly Champneys's most famous and significant construction; it was not his first Gothic building as he built, amongst other structures, the Library for Mansfield College, Oxford, in the medieval style between 1887 and 1889

(Fig.5).

Below - Fig.5: View of Mansfield College, Oxford. HiraV (CC BY-SA 3.0).



The John Rylands Library is a striking structure; built from Cumbrian sandstone, it stands on Deansgate like a church, and it is modelled on the idea of a church as well: its main reading room has a central vessel mirroring a cathedral's nave with an impressive, awe-inspiring vault and large tracery windows all around: it is a truly remarkable space and one of the most memorable libraries in Britain. The piano nobile—or main floor—is raised up from ground level to protect the collection and reading room from the noise and dirt of Manchester, and Champneys took full advantage of all the design and decorative opportunities of Gothic to create a lavishly carved building in the Perpendicular and Decorated Gothic styles. You can see the flying buttresses, lancet windows, cusping, and grotesques.

One curious feature of the façade facing Deansgate, is that it displays a notable array of heraldry (**Fig.6 - with further detail below**). They include the coats of arms of the Universities of Oxford (on the left oriel window) and Cambridge (on the right oriel window). Below Oxford is the arms for Victoria University—incorporated in 1880; a decade before the building was begun—and under Cambridge is The University of London. Finally, just above the original entrance doorways—the modern, twenty-first century addition to the rear of the library is the new entrance—displays the impaled arms of John Rylands and his wife; Enriqueta petitioned the College of Arms in London to grant both her and her husband arms (as they were until then not entitled to display arms through hereditary right; they, instead, had to buy them); the arms for her husband were not only applied for posthumously, but also granted so! That to the right of the original main entrance is the arms for the Country Borough of St Helens, Merseyside, where John Rylands was born. See [here](#).

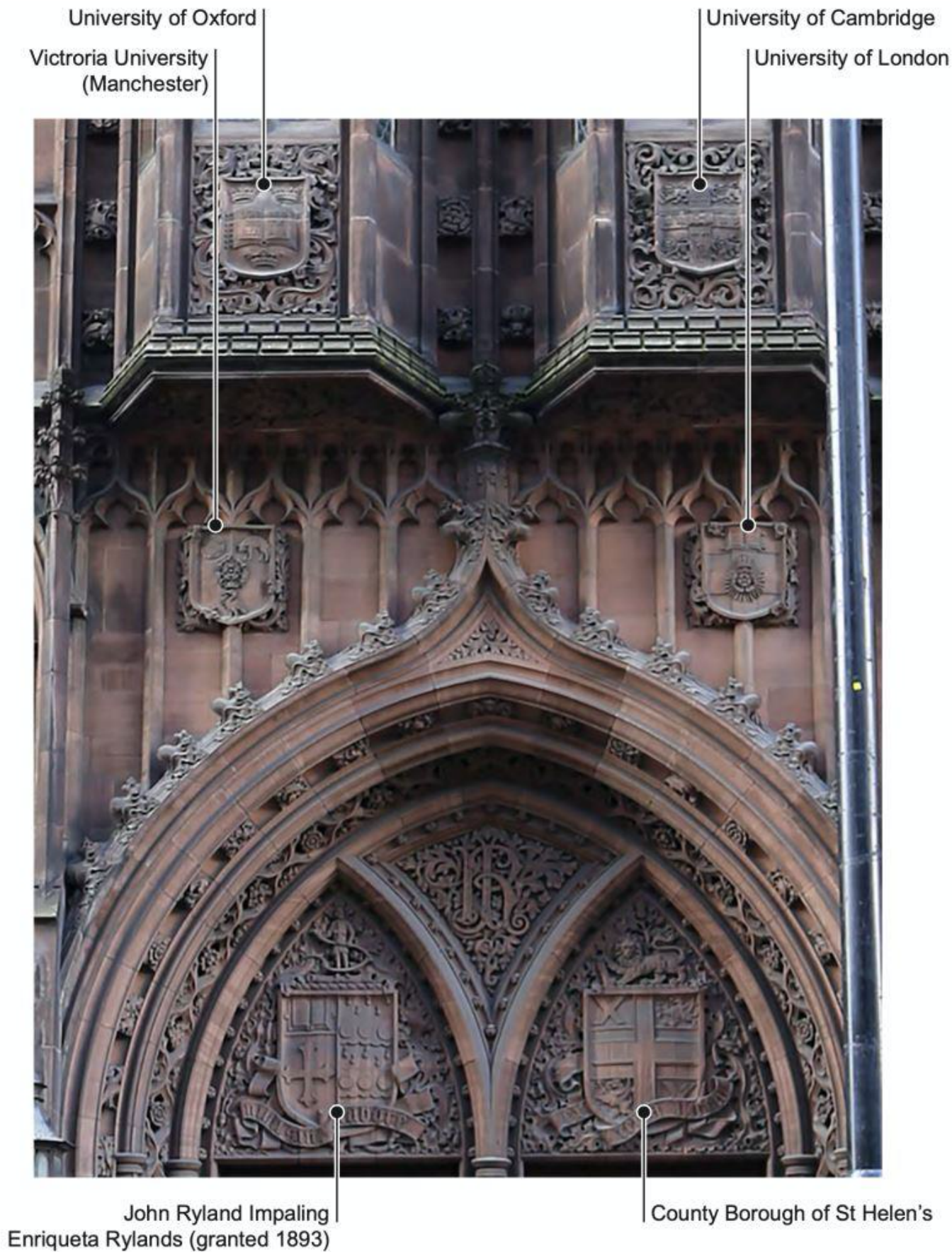
Below - Fig.6: Exterior façade of The John Rylands Library, Manchester, facing Deansgate. © Peter N. Lindfield.



These details are truly extraordinary in the way that they place the library within the context of the other great, ancient universities in the UK, and they also associate John Rylands and his wife with these illustrious institutions (*see detail below - images composed by Dr Peter N. Lindfield*).

Decoding Heraldry on The Deansgate Façade of The John Rylands Library, Manchester

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University of Oxford



University of Cambridge



Victoria University (Manchester)



University of London

John Ryland Impaling
Enriqueta Rylands (granted 1893)

County Borough of St Helen's



Built over a period of 10 years, the building was finished in late 1899, and it opened to the public on 1 January 1900. Listed today by Historic England as Grade I, [here](#), this recognises the building's exceptional significance to Manchester's built heritage. A series of photographs of the library follow. Once it reopens to the public, it is certainly worth a visit; combine it with a visit to

Chetham's and you'll see and be able to compare two Gothic libraries: one genuinely ancient and the other thoroughly modern (despite appearing entirely to the contrary)!

Below - Fig.7: The John Rylands Library Study Area. Michael D Beckwith (BY-CC-3.0)



Below - Fig.8: The John Rylands Library Reading Room Enclave. Michael D Beckwith (BY-CC-3.0).

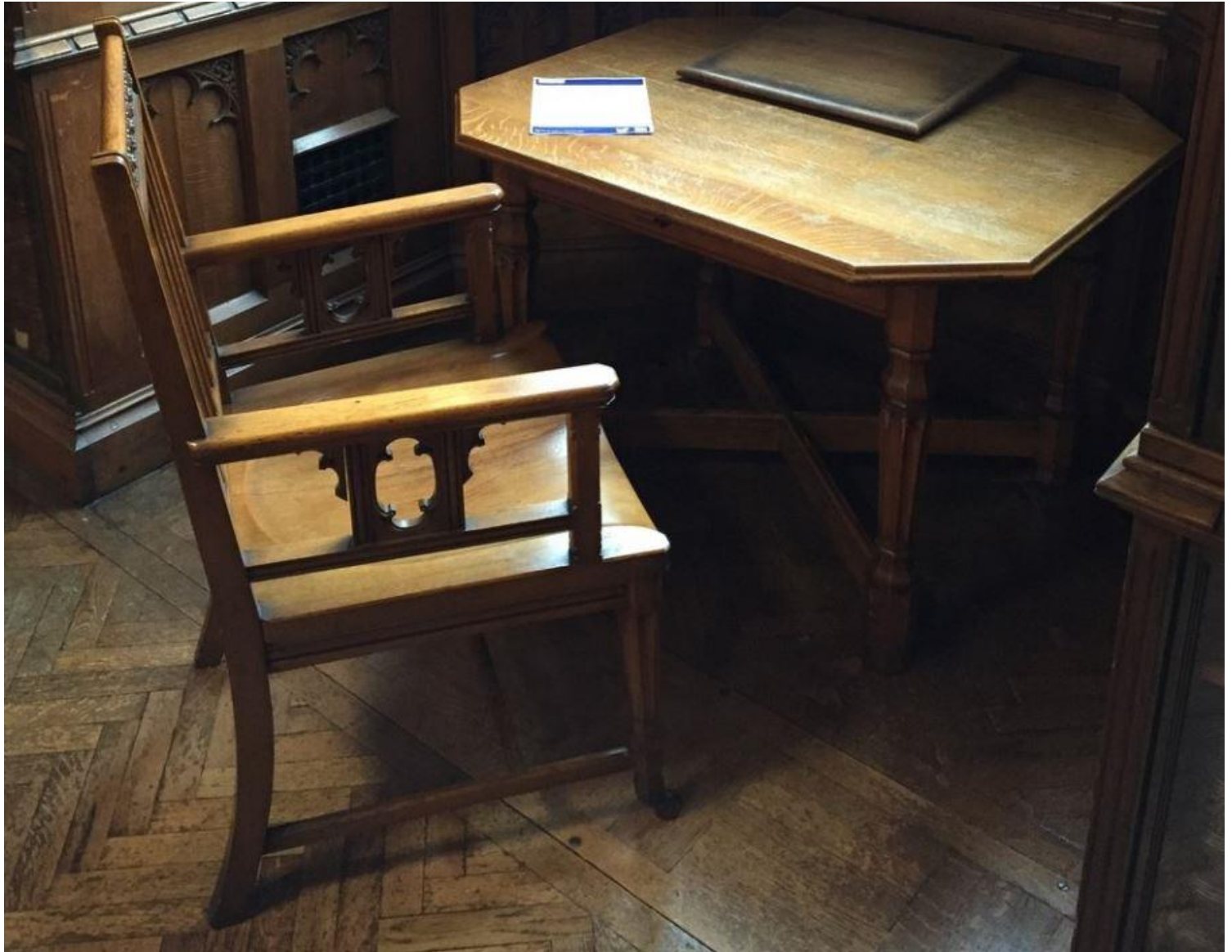


Below - Fig.9: The John Rylands Library Interior. Michael D Beckwith (BY-CC-3.0).



Below - Fig.10: Study area within The John Rylands Library. © Peter N. Lindfield.





By Dr Peter N. Lindfield

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